



Lots of love: Monday at the Marriage Bureau

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It's more than a license. Spending an afternoon at the H. Carl Moultrie Courthouse in downtown D.C. reveals tales of true love. (AP Photo)

By Jamie Slater
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WASHINGTON -- As Haley Harter walked to her first date with Philippe Chetrit, a bird pooped on her head.

What could have made an already-awkward situation worse was no big deal for the 31-year-old. "I knew it was good luck," she says.

And it appears she was right. On a recent Monday afternoon nearly three years after that first date, the couple walked through the door of the H. Carl Moultrie Courthouse in downtown D.C. to apply for a marriage license.

And they were not alone.

Harter and Chetrit, 34, were just one of the 56 couples who came to the marriage licensing room on the fourth floor of the courthouse that warm April day.

Filled with cushy chairs and artwork, along with a selection of Ladies' Home Journal and Gourmet magazines, the room doesn't have the typical courthouse ambiance. Even the clerk, who processed all the applications on Monday, calls it a happy place.

During the 1 p.m. lunch hour, the room was swamped -- one of the busiest days in a while, which the clerk attributed to the warmer-than-expected weather. From 2 p.m. to the office's 4:30 p.m. close, there was a steady stream of applicants -- but almost no one had to wait.

On average, the Marriage Bureau gets about 45 applications each day. Monday, April 14, was not the busiest day this year, though -- 72 couples applied right after Valentine's Day.

Everyone who gets married in D.C. comes to this room to apply for a marriage license -- people of all races, ages and sexual orientations. And it's not just D.C. residents: Engaged couples from all over the country, even the world, walk through these doors -- many of them because they can't get married elsewhere.

Some will wed at the courthouse, others in their parents' backyards, and still more in churches or elegant venues. Despite all their differences, one thing unites them: They're in love.

Wedding season kicks into high gear in May, making it a busy time of year at the Marriage Bureau.

Here are just a few stories from those who walk through the doors.

Keesha Reid, 26, and Jessica Hill, 24, met through a mutual friend five years ago. For the past two years, they have talked about getting married. They live in Montgomery, Ala., but they can't get married there, so they came to D.C.

"It's the closest place we can get married," Hill says.

The couple prides themselves on being spontaneous -- they talk fondly about the time they went to Florida together to go parasailing and jet-skiing, and the time they went to the Trey Songz concert. So it wasn't out of character when, one day, Hill suggested they just drive to D.C. to save money on airfare.

At 10 p.m. on April 13, Reid, Hill and one of Hill's friends left Montgomery and drove straight through the night, stopping only to fill up with gas three times. Thirteen hours later, they reached D.C., having spent only \$40.

They drove back to D.C. for their April 28 court ceremony, and brought a few friends.

They plan to honeymoon in Florida for a week before they return to Montgomery for a small gathering with family and friends.

"I always wanted to visit D.C., and I guess this is a sweet, sweet way of visiting," Hill says.

Darricka Orr-Lewis, 28, came to the courthouse to support her sister, Shamika Lewis, 29, as she filled out an application to marry her girlfriend, Sandra Freeman, 41.

This brought back memories for Orr-Lewis, who got married at the courthouse to then-girlfriend Corelle Orr, 36, in December. Both couples live in Richmond, Va., where they can't get married.

As Sandra and Shamika filled out their paperwork, Darricka and Corelle shared their love story, which started when they were both in jail in 2005. Even though Corelle got out first in 2008, they remained friends by writing letters and passing messages through family until Darricka got out in 2012.

"We haven't been apart since," Corelle says.

When Sandra and Shamika get married in October, Darricka and Corelle will serve as best man and matron of honor, respectively. After, everyone will head back to Richmond for a reception at the Robinson Theater.

Darricka is excited for her sister.

"Married life is wonderful," she says.

Peggy Duxbury, 54, is getting married for the first time at a courthouse ceremony. After meeting in graduate school in Boston and dating for 10 years, she and her fiancé got engaged this past year.

"We're pretty excited about it," she says, her face lighting up. "We've been together for a while. Our families are excited."

Duxbury, who came to the courthouse alone to fill out her paperwork, lives with her fiancé on Capitol Hill. She was still finalizing wedding plans, which have since taken place, while at the Marriage Bureau.

"We're getting close," she says. "I still have shoes to get."

Haley Harter and Philippe Chetrit are having what they call a "very J. Crew wedding," since they bought their wedding outfits at the popular retailer. A rabbi will officiate the ceremony.

Chetrit popped the question in September at the top of Old Rag Mountain in Shenandoah National Park. Before that, Harter, who wore leggings and a backpack to the courthouse, said she knew it was coming because she saw a picture of the ring in his phone when they were looking at pictures together.

"We both froze," Chetrit adds. They pretended it didn't happen.

"It was the most awkward -- not even half a second," Harter continues.

So, when Chetrit suggested they take the 2.5-hour hike, she had a suspicion he would propose. "I kind of figured because he was making such a big deal about this hike," Harter says.

About 80 people are coming to the wedding reception Memorial Day weekend, but only 40 are coming to the ceremony.

"It's great that it's here in D.C. because everyone's close by, except my parents," says Harter, who is from Texas. "His mom is doing so much."

"It should be a very breezy, lovely ceremony," Chetrit adds.

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